

WIN THE NEAL SCHON GUITAR!

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The ROCK magazine!

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KISS!
NEW SHOW
EXCLUSIVE!

Ten Years On Stack Heels!

DANTE BONUTTO joins the Kiss Anniversary Tour. Pix by Ross Halfin.

"MOMMY, WHERE'S Peter Pan?" The child looked ahead, face creased against the light, dazzled by the spectacle unveiling before him. The fireworks and the flashes he didn't mind, they reminded him of July 4, happy times, but all these bangs were too much. He was only little after all...

"It wasn't like this before," he said, sulking. But his words were lost in the cauldron of noise, whipped away to some shadowy corner. He looked into the arena. Where were his friends? The crowd around him were all big boys and girls, shouting and waving, eyes wild. "I want to go home," he cried, small hands tugging at his mother's sleeve.

At first there was no response, then, as he pulled harder, the figure beside him slumped forward, showering popcorn, his popcorn, onto the floor.

"Mommy... are you alright?" He reached forward then drew back in alarm as the head fell to one side on the lap. He was frightened now, trembling. Where the ear should have been was a small charred hole, still smoking, and from the hole came a slow red trickle that dripped down onto the patent leather shoes...

Suddenly, he was engulfed. Everyone was on their feet, straining to see. He turned to the stage, now black, and between the bob of heads he saw a pair of eyes, red, blazing. All around people were holding out their hands and shouting strange incantations, desperate to attract the attention of whatever lurked ahead. Yet, there was no doubt about it... the two fiery orbs were trained directly on him, beckoning his soul.

A sickly green light cut a swathe through the dark, revealing a figure, massive though slightly hunched, on the very edge of the stage. On a chain, round his neck, hung a large axe. He stroked it lightly, sensuously, and the child felt the tremors in the pit of his stomach.

In a second, all became clear. He recognised the figure. He had his poster on the bedroom wall. Peter Pan he'd called him last time. He'd liked him then, but now something was wrong. Why wasn't he flying? Why wasn't he friendly anymore? And why was he looking at him like that, calling out to him...?

The figure stroked the axe again, writhing now, contorting its huge frame. He pointed and flames sprang from nowhere while, at his feet, two bug-eyed dragons leered in approval. Was that saliva

dripping from their fangs? He couldn't be sure. Confused, head spinning, he longed to rush home and bury himself beneath the bedclothes, but the icy voice booming in his ears told him there was no escape. Nowhere to run...

BY THE TIME you lay hands on this thunderous organ, Kiss should be grafting hard on a follow up album to 'Creatures Of The Night', having just completed the opening leg of an extensive, five shows a week US trek, their first in three years.

Determined to restore both crunch and credibility, the tour (showcasing a 60 foot wide tank stage set) has seen the band dispensing significantly harder material to a significantly older audience. True, the latter need more convincing now, more hard-line persuasion that this particular party hasn't run out of pretzels, but all at least remain readily conversant with the Kiss name/legend.

Here, after all, is a band who, rolling the punches of press and peers, made it acceptable to have fan clubs and flashing logos, to go to town on merchandising, a band who, while musical purists were petulantly stamping their feet, declaring it all to be no more than Madison Ave hype, were proving that rock'n'roll is showbiz with the emphasis squarely on the word 'show'.

In the mid-seventies the time was ripe for Kiss and they took full advantage, stirring up a mania (as in 'Beatlemania') that took root in America then, like some rolling street shindig, spread far, far beyond. But times change and by November '81, when the band released '(MT)TE' (Music from) The Elder, their 16th LP, it was clear their once poll-topping popularity was not what it had been.

A fully-blown concept caper with the emphasis on musicianship rather than mayhem, '(MT)TE' might have been just the thing to bring Kiss fever back to the boil. It might have been, but it wasn't. In the event, the Kiss Army kept the LP at a safe barge-pole's distance and guitarist Ace Frehley seemed none too happy with it either.

"I don't hate the album, but I can't say I'm crazy about it. Basically, I'm just an HM guitarist..." is how he responded to my probing on the matter when our paths crossed at the London Hilton late last year. A rethink was, thus, deemed in order.

Out went the spin-offs, the proposed 'Elder' book and film, out went the new streamlined look (shorter hair, no platforms), and out went longstanding manager, Bill Aucoin. For a while the band sought a replacement but when one potential ten-per-center came up with the bright idea that they should go out in (wait for it) half make-up, they decided to call a halt to the quest and make all subsequent decisions from within. Then at least they'd have no-one to blame/congratulate but themselves.

It was roughly at this point that stories of Frehley's departure from the band began to infiltrate the UK press. Actually reports of this nature had been doing the rounds in the US for quite some time; a 'Kiss Special' mag published in 1979, for example, carried the story that Ace, teed off with the gross-out publicity afforded the Simmons tongue, was up and quitting there and then and that the group were seeking to replace him with a woman! Yes, well... but the rumours that followed the release of '(MT)TE' seemed a good deal more informed, though the subsequent 'Killers' LP had his face on the sleeve and, when I met up with Gene Simmons, Paul Stanley and Eric Carr at the Record Plant in Los Angeles last summer, they were adamant that the absent Ace was not ex-Kiss, simply in Connecticut dealing with "domestic issues".

A few months later, however, things came more sharply into focus. Calling from LA, Paul revealed that Ace's continued low profile had, in fact, been due to a serious car crash, something the band had chosen to keep quiet until he was fit to return. "He's lucky to be alive," I was told. "He totalled his Porsche, he's still in pain..."

Certainly Ace looked none too well at the Hilton. Not talking much, losing the thread of the

conversation and moving rather gingerly, this was clearly not the man, who, several years ago, had reduced the Tom Snyder show (a US 'Parkinson' style chat-in) to something approaching a riot, stunning a bewildered Tom with his explosive cackle and continued attempts to equip an accompanying teddy bear for inter-galactic travel. Great fun...



Kiss with new guitarist Vinnie Vincent (centre).

The writing I suppose was on the wall, though it was still something of a shock when word came back from the early shows that a strange new guitarist, Vinnie 'Wiz' Vincent, was now lining up with the band, stage-right. Only later did it become clear that this was, in fact, Vincent Cusano, mystery soloist on the 'Creatures' LP and co-writer of three of the tracks, and that his position was more than just temporary.

Whether at the time of the visit to the Hilton (part of a short promo tour of Europe), Kiss already knew Ace wouldn't be hitting the boards with them, bringing him along simply for appearances sake, is a difficult question to answer. The band themselves say no, definitely NOT, stressing that, at that point, there was no other guitarist poised in the wings, though Simmons admits certain question marks were beginning to appear.

"In the middle of the

European visit I was having serious doubts about whether or not Ace would make the tour. What would happen is he would sleep for entire days and have dizzy spells, start dragging his feet, and it was all down to the car crash.

"He had internal injuries though what the hell they were I'm not sure. He seemed fine when he came out of the hospital, but I know for a fact that he doesn't have a car anymore, he has an accordion. The police report said he was going 120mph when he went into a wall. It was his seventh accident . . .

"It was pretty much on that first trans-Atlantic flight that we noticed Ace was out cold and I'll be damned if I'm gonna hold a guy to a legal commitment



when this is a family. We do this for fun."

So where does Ace stand at the moment? It's difficult to say. Even the band don't seem too sure . . . If he comes up with some suitable songs, one or two, I'm assured, might make the next album and it's possible he could play some bits and pieces too though, to avoid further upheaval, it seems likely that Vinnie will continue to take the lead both in the studio and onstage. All you can say (sob) is that the chance of Ace redonning Kiss cape and clodhoppers for anything more than the occasional jam now looks pretty slim.

"Actually," says Paul, "we called him three or four weeks before the show in New Orleans and asked if he wanted to come down and play (with Vinnie), but he didn't feel up to it. Listen . . . Ace is my pal, my good friend, and whatever's gonna make him happy is fine by me."

With the latter's shift to a

more remote branch on the Kiss family tree coming at several minutes past the eleventh hour, Vinnie found the pressure well and truly on. Not only did he have to please/appease those who'd seen the press releases and the ads, hurriedly organised a week before the tour to announce his arrival, but, even harder, he had to win over the kids who hadn't. The ones who turned up at the show and got one almighty shock, for, while Ace certainly wasn't the most elegant of musicians, lurching around, teetering on the brink of collapse ("I think everybody saw Ace as borderline" - Paul), his appeal was undeniable and Vinnie, faced with having to fill some of the biggest shoes in rock, was understandably apprehensive.

"I figured the kids would boo and shout out: 'we want Ace!' but they've really accepted me. They send me gifts and fan mail and I'd like to say thank you because their support is everything to me, everything."

Though an experienced musician, a veteran of many bands/sessions, Vinnie's entry into the world of black lips and 24-carat conks has clearly thrilled him right down to his stackheel stilts. It's true he's been in the band a good while now but as the early days, his first tentative steps as a bonafide star, disappeared rapidly in a blur of excitement, it's only recently he's had the chance to take a few backward steps and acknowledge his sudden change of status. To come to terms with the fact that women are now forming a queue to have him ink their chests (an old Kiss tradition - see "Powerage") or the business end of their thighs.

"It's just beyond my wildest dreams that this is happening," he says, wide-eyed, as we settle down to a pot of tea after a recent show in Houston (Kiss Torpedoes Texas?) "This band enables me to live out all my fantasies both as a guitar player and a rock star."

A quiet, modest guy, Vinnie, born in 1952 in the New York borough of Brooklyn, was exposed to music from an early age with his father kerranging quietly on a steel guitar and his mother singing along. Country and Western perhaps, but mayhem enough to incite the burgeoning 'Wiz' . . .

"I started banging away on the guitar when I was three or four years old but it wasn't until '62/'63 that I got seriously involved. I took lessons and developed an interest in the classical side of playing which I really love. I just wish I could devote more time to it."

It soon became clear that Vinnie wasn't interested in proper jobs. In the summer of '69 he spent a few weeks burning boxes in the incinerator room of a department store (actually good training for Kiss!), but, this temporary concession to nine-to-fiveism excepted, he chose to pass his time teaching guitar, selling them and struggling to keep down a none-too-balanced 'peanut and jelly' diet.

Finally, some three years ago, in an effort to escape NY's winter and lack of ready work, he took off for Los Angeles where a friend found him a place to stay. Now at least he could starve in the sun . . .

"After a while, though, I met Adam Mitchell (co-author of three songs on 'Creatures') and we started working together. Then Adam did some writing with Gene and I said: 'I'm gonna meet this guy if it kills me'. I had nothing to lose so one day I saw him sitting there and went over on the sly. I gave him my telephone number and asked him to call me if he wanted to write. He said OK, and I swear to God I went home and waited by the phone for a week straight, not sleeping or eating. Finally, he called and the first songs we came up with were 'Killer' and 'I Love It Loud'."

"I was literally going out of my mind, I couldn't sleep (or eat?) I was so excited all the time. Gene said: 'Why don't you meet Paul', so I did and we ended up writing 'I Still Love You' and a couple of other things."

At this point, with the 'Killers' songs already recorded, the 'Creatures' material set to go and Ace largely out of action, auditions for a new lead guitarist began in earnest. Vinnie saw his chance . . .

"I must have made the biggest pest out of myself and probably the biggest fool too. I just nagged Gene constantly ("He was a pain in my ass!" - Gene) It was like: 'I know I'm right for your band, just give me a chance, give me a shot, I'm gonna kick this band's ass!'"

These pin-pricks in the Simmons hide went on for several weeks as did the flow of potential guitarists, most showing roots no deeper than the last Van Halen album. The Union Jack was hoisted by a few hopeful letters, the guitarists from Heart and Chicago ran through their paces and Angel's Punky Meadows, he of the sculptured bouffant, came and, well, sat in, but no-one quite fitted the bill. Vinnie, having the same Beck/

Page leanings as Gene and Paul, was finally asked to give it a 'shot', a request that led to more sleepless nights and wholesale fasting.

Once the 'Wiz' set to work in the studio (the aforementioned Record Plant, LA), his relationship with the band instantly upped a notch. He felt more than ever that he was the right man for Kiss but, not wanting to drive Simmons into a straight-jacket, he simply did what was required and left with no further pestering.

"I just said: 'God bless you guys, good luck. If you ever get a chance, call me'. Then one day, about three or four weeks later, I was taking a bath and the phone rang . . ."

What followed was pure Mel Brooks. Gene (for it was he) proceeded to test the suds-soaked Vinnie with a series of 'what if?' questions, before weighing in with the biggie - 'what if I asked you to be in the group?' - a query that sent the damp one, head presumably light from lack of nourishment, spiralling rapidly out of control.

"I tell Gene I'll phone him back then I get out of the bath and start screaming like a lunatic. I'm running from room to room, standing in corners and banging my head against the wall. This must have gone on for 20 minutes until, finally, I manage to compose myself and call back. Gene said: 'take a flight to New York and we'll rehearse. We've got a tour starting'."

Though Eric Carr has now figured in the Kiss ranks for some three years, the opening leg of the tour in question was, in fact, the first chance fans across the US had had to see him in action. And this, coupled with Vinnie's impromptu arrival, meant in effect that the band were having to (re)make their pitch to the nation with 50 per cent new personnel.

Clearly, there was plenty of room for nerves though, with Vinnie having managed only two weeks rehearsal on the tank, Simmons' prime preoccupation, for the early Mid-West dates at least, was keeping him comfortably atop his high altitude footwear and away from the more combustible parts of the stage. He did a sound job.

Vinnie may have given a passable impression of a falling redwood at one of the very first shows, but at the gigs I caught recently in Dallas, Houston and San Antonio (all in mid-sized arenas, respectably full) he barely put a foot wrong, making a marked impression on audiences that, as already hinted, have more to offer

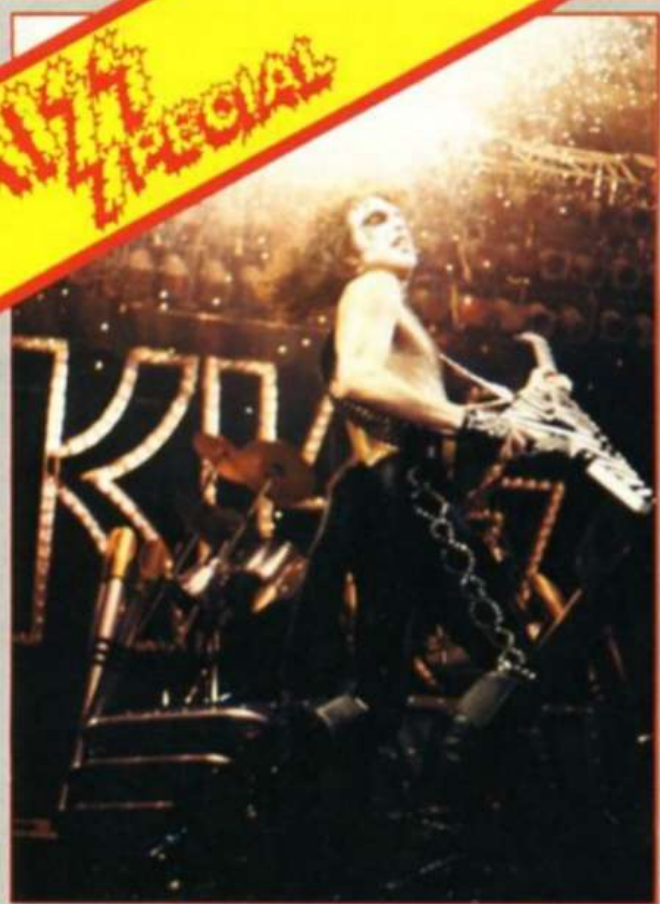
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WIZARD SPECIAL





KISS SPECIAL





WITH SPECIAL

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in the beard and bust departments than they would have done a few years ago.

Simply, the pre-pubescent set, the ones who 'oohed' and 'aahed' at the FX but weren't too sold on the horrid, distracting din, are no longer in evidence and what remains is a pure rock'n'roll audience, 15-18 in age, very discerning and evenly divided sex-wise.

"There's really some good-looking stuff out there," says Simmons, a man who should know, "it's not beasts. Let's just say it's not a Motorhead audience."

The mania of old, however, the blinkered adulation, the clinging to the tops of cars and the wholesale swooning, there's precious little sign of. That belonged to another era. Now the band face a mania of a different sort...

Holding up a typically grandiose quote from Bob Ezrin (producer of 'Destroyer' and '(M)FTE'), highlighting the band as "symbols of unfettered evil and sensuality", and claiming that the Kiss initials stand for Kids/Knights/Kings in Satan's Service (not Knights In your Sister's Slip, as Simmons prefers), local preachers, parents and old farts anonymous have accused the group of espousing sexual perversion, immorality, political unwholesomeness and drugs/alcohol abuse. It's not a joke. Prayers have been offered up, petitions raised and records, having first been spun backwards to check for satanic messages, ceremoniously cremated.

Still, the gig in Dallas proceeds regardless, the sole problem being that recently introduced by-laws prevent the band from doing their standard 'WW3 in a phone booth' impression. Not surprisingly, the attendant fire 'n' brimstoners are a mite peeved, remaining sober and subdued throughout a show that concentrates heavily on old/new material (there's nothing included from 'Dynasty', 'Unmasked' or 'The Elder') and sees the band covering the stage with an aggression and verve not witnessed since their early, underdog days.

Kiss, it's clear, are hungry again. After mild anorexic bouts, the band are now back to full Pacman potency, forcing those assembled into Wimbledon-style sweeps of the head in an effort to keep up with the unfolding action. Where to look? At Simmons, moistening the air with his biggest asset (I believe)? At Stanley putting his newly-acquired knee-pads through their paces with some baseball slides, or at new boy Vinnie conjuring all manner of magic from his gold 'shark's fin' Charvel, a guitar originally designed for/in conjunction with Randy Rhoads that Grover Jackson, the owner of the Charvel company, has since asked him to represent.

"To me, it's the guitar of the future," he says. "I just hope I'm doing it justice..."

It may be the result of an unfortunate accident that leaves a pair of long-trusted jeans hanging in tatters and my nether reaches looking like something from a Van Halen show, but standing atop the mixing desk the next night in Houston I feel strangely vulnerable. This, after all, is to be the full show, undiluted by the dabbings of spoilsport authorities.

As the lights dim and throats are cleared, a rising rumble fills the hall; squeaks, rattles and lashings of low-end nudge you in the chest, steam hisses violently from the lighting trusses overhead, the 'treads' flanking the stage burst into illuminated life and the turret cum drum riser swings back and forth. The tank is 'on the move', leaving your kneecaps a-tremble, gonads a-gallop and all vital organs in a sudden state of alarm. Then silence... for a moment...

'ALRIGHT HOUSTON! YOU WANTED THE BEST AND YOU'VE GOT THE BEST. THE HOTTEST BAND IN THE WORLD... KISS!!' Even before the last echoes have spiralled into the roof, 'Creatures Of The Night' is roaring from the generous PA, drums reinforced by a succession of on-the-beat bangs supplied courtesy of a pyro technician more used to simulating the sounds of warfare for Army training manoeuvres.

'Detroit Rock City' follows, the tank now trundling on familiar ground, while 'Cold Gin', another standard, has the 'alcohol' intro rap extended to take in Jack Daniels (well, this is Texas!) Next Stanley's enquiring after our health and,

fearing the worst, that we might all have a dose ('ROK AN' ROLL NEWMONIAL' you understand), decides to call out... 'WHAT?'... to call out... 'I CAN'T HEAR YOU'... 'DAKTAR LURVE!' The cowbell clanks, the riff stutters into life, and Gene, a carnal consultant of rare repute, steps to the mike to deliver his lewdly amorous advice.

As his crotch pumps and grinds, the mercury soars. "It's getting so hot in here," confirms Paul, "we're gonna have to call out the firehouse." Cue fireman's helmet, sirens and spinning lights, not to mention flaming sword and the hottest mouth in rock. On six or seven occasions Gene's fire-breathing forays have left him light on 'lashes and eyebrows and smoking somewhat around the gills, but this time around his rapidly sprouting locks emerge scorch and cinder free.

Satisfied with his performance The Demon stomps into the wings, leaving the stage clear for Stanley's solo spot, an exercise in musicianship and crowd control with each side of the house getting the chance for a good old-fashioned bellow. 'I Want You' is next, a song not performed live since '77, then it's Vinnie's turn to grab the spotlight and sparkle.

Having a genuine, longstanding interest in the power of the pyramids, the gold cross on his forehead and nose, the ancient Egyptian symbol for everlasting life, was a natural make-up choice (though, at Simmons request, he flirted briefly with a fierce hawk-like visage), relating directly, as with all Kiss characters, to the inner man. Ace was the spaceman, he's the 'Guitar Wizard', a figure bound in myth and magic who, while cutting a similar dash to Frehley onstage, won't be counting down any rockets from his guitar though there are plans afoot for him to shoot fireballs out over the audience - from his hand! For the moment, however, he seems content to tease a tumble of notes from his guitar and coax the centre lighting truss down over his head. Child's play...

"If it's too loud you're too old," the old Nugent maxim, heralds the arrival of 'I Love It Loud' after which the turret, belching smoke, rumbles to the fore allowing Eric, between bursts of actual playing, to take a few explosive potshots at the lighting rig above. And so it continues, the 'Young Person's Guide to Armageddon', with 'War Machine' and 'Love Gun' providing the cue for more general whizzbangery and 'God

Of Thunder' bringing out Simmons 'run amok' instincts.

Featuring giant jets of flame and that ritualised bloody spout, this isn't so much a song as a three-minute warning, while 'Black Diamond', which closes the set proper, sees the band's three upfront members joining Eric on the turret, watching blissfully as the mighty barrel aims and fires, reducing two 'flying' cabs to smouldering spare parts.

And so to the encores... first 'Strutter' then a rousing run-through of (what else) 'Rock And Roll All Nite', a song that seals the bond between band and audience with both parties telling those outside the Kiss Kause exactly what they can do.

"I think this kills anything we've ever done before," says Paul after the show, an assessment that makes their forthcoming album, set for late summer/early autumn release, an exciting prospect indeed. Not wanting to tamper with a winning formula, the band will continue to co-produce with Michael James Jackson, though recording this time will probably take place in NY rather than LA.

Already a handful of songs are primed for the studio and it looks likely that Vinnie will get the chance to handle some lead vocals, both on the album and, later, onstage when the band continue their US tour in August. After that, well... a UK tour sometime between September and November now looks on the cards and, in the meantime, fans can take heart from the release of 'Creatures Of The Night', certainly the album's prime piece of pounding, as a single, and the knowledge that the current Kiss line-up is more oblivious to compromise than any before.

"We're hungry again," says Gene, "it's just more fun now. The food tastes better and so do the women..."

"... Suddenly, he was frightened no more. As if in a dream, he saw the figure's head lurch forward, the ebony lips part and the tongue slide out, curling and spitting. He knew what he must do. As the figure shook its head wildly from side to side, spraying a crimson rain on those below, the child reached down to the patent leather, now red, hot and sticky.

The creature, satisfied, straightened and crossed its arms. The eyes were upon him still as slowly, very slowly, the tongue worked its way around the lips, savouring every moment, every drop. The child, now filled with a strange inner calm, smiled and, eyes piercing the darkness, raised his fingers to his lips...